

How Is Syria Ruled?

by [Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](#)

May 9, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Rabil \(/experts/robert-rabil-0\)](#)

Robert Rabil is the LLS Distinguished Professor of Current Affairs in Florida Atlantic University's Department of Political Science.



Brief Analysis

On the heels of its military withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria is preparing for the Tenth Regional Congress of the Baath Party, the first such congress in five years and only the second in twenty years. Prior to the regional congress, scheduled for June, the party will hold a national pan-Arab congress, its first in twenty-two years. President Bashar al-Asad may hope to use these events to advance his reformist claims. Indeed, several initiatives are expected toward this end, including changing the name “Baath Arab Socialist Party” to “Democratic Baath,” dismantling the national leadership, and amending the law for political parties. The congresses provide a good opportunity to examine Syria’s political structure, offering a window into the regime’s mindset and its potential reactions to regional developments.

Background: Hafez al-Asad’s Authoritarianism

In November 1970, following a period of political upheaval in Syria, Hafiz al-Asad assumed power in a bloodless coup. Shortly thereafter, he set about remaking the country’s political system, creating a formal structure in order to institutionalize his regime. In 1971, he appointed a 173-member parliament, which then nominated him as the sole candidate for the presidency. This established a pattern of national referendums in which Asad regularly received the approval of around 99 percent of voters. In 1972, he established the Progressive National Front (PNF), whose function was to rally Syria’s progressive forces around the Baath Party in the interest of confronting Israel. In 1973, Asad promulgated a “permanent constitution,” which designated Baath “the vanguard party in the society and state.” The document’s preamble emphasized the party’s revolutionary direction, establishing a nexus between the national and socialist struggle, the unity of Arab republics, and the struggle against colonialism and Zionism.

These reforms came to be known as the “corrective movement.” They created the formal structure by which Syrian politics were conducted. Yet, actual power resided in an informal structure based on the relationship between regime loyalists and the mostly Alawi military and security officers. Regarding the latter, Syria had been placed under a state of emergency since 1963, and Asad justified continued martial law by claiming that Syria was in a state of war with Israel. The dreaded Mukhabarat (security services) were granted a particularly powerful role that extended beyond security matters. At the same time, Asad promoted his leadership cult. As early as May 1971, the new Baath Command designated him “Qaid al-Masira,” or “Leader of the [Nation’s] March.” Similarly, in January 1985, the party’s Eighth Regional Congress underscored that “loyalty to him is loyalty to the party and to the people

and their cause.”

The various branches of the regime’s formal structure—especially the parliament, the PNF, and the popular organizations, along with the state-owned industries—played the role of mobilization and control, effectively co-opting potential opposition. In 1990, for example, the parliament was enlarged from 195 to 250 members. One-third of the seats were reserved for independent deputies, offering token representation to social forces that hitherto had none while preserving the Baath majority’s control. Similarly, the regime developed the popular organizations into hierarchical, quasigovernmental bodies dedicated to upholding the state’s priorities. Indeed, Syria’s various unions and associations (representing, teachers, artisans, writers, peasants, etc.) served as perfect fronts through which to control society at large. Through these and other means, Asad molded modern Syria into an authoritarian state that in many ways resembled a prison, with all activity revolving around his power and omnipresent leadership cult.

How Bashar Rules

On June 10, 2000, Hafiz al-Asad passed away after thirty years in power. The dreaded and stern rule of the “respected” leader, whose cult of personality fused Arab nationalism and Arab leadership qualities, gave way to the rule of Bashar al-Asad. Bashar lacks his father’s personality cult, and his legitimacy has been further affected by the regime’s failure to cope with socioeconomic challenges and reformist aspirations. Needless to say, Syria, like most other Arab countries, faces serious economic, social, and political problems while at the same time undergoing explosive population growth. Bashar is no Mikhail Gorbachev; he is not eager to introduce the Syrian equivalent of perestroika or glasnost, which could unseat him from power. In fact, he clamped down on the reform movement that he himself helped launch once he realized its ramifications for the political system. The manner in which Bashar has reshuffled his government indicates that the locus of power in Syria remains fluid, further obscuring the country’s decisionmaking process. Decisions are made behind closed doors, with no effort to explain their rationale to the Syrian people. But as Syrian analyst Ammar Abdulhamid perceptively observed, “After all these years, one thing is clear: in times of crises, or when it comes to decisions of major significance, Syria’s top leaders, for whatever reason, tend to side with the hardliners. Thus, they bear the greatest share of responsibility for Syria’s present condition.”

The country’s informal levers of power remain in the hands of Alawi officials. Bashar’s brother, Maher, has emerged as the strongman of the Republican Guards, whose main function is to protect the presidential palace and the capital. Ghazi Kanaan, former chief of intelligence in Lebanon and confidant of Bashar’s father, was appointed minister of interior in October 2004. Kanaan developed a reputation for his shrewd manner and brutal tactics, though he has come to advocate gradual reform. Bashar’s brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, was recently appointed chief of military intelligence; he is considered a hardliner. Bahjat Suleiman, another hardliner, heads the internal security division of the General Intelligence Directorate, and his influence surpasses that of organization chief Hisham Bakhtiar. (It should be noted that, according to the rumor mill in Damascus and Beirut, Maher, Shawkat, and Suleiman supported the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri while Bashar and Kanaan opposed it.) Gen. Muhammad Mansoura replaced Kanaan as head of the Political Security Directorate, and his power is reportedly on the rise. Gen. Zoul Himma Chaliche, Bashar’s cousin, is in charge of protecting the president. Gen. Ali Habib replaced Hasan Turkmani as chief of staff in May 2004, while Turkmani replaced Mustafa Tlas as defense minister. All of these officials, with the exception of Turkmani, are Alawis with tribal and/or familial connection to Bashar (as his last name connotes, Turkmani is a Turkman). The only Sunni official with significant power is Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, whose hardline policies are infamous.

Indeed, the configuration of the new power structure in Syria has followed the old pattern institutionalized by the late Asad. No organic change had taken place; Bashar’s regime appears to rely on an informal core of loyal military officers, mainly Alawi, and a formal core of high-ranking state officials, mainly Sunni. Similarly, the political system

has undergone no significant institutional changes. Because he lacks his father's leadership skills and personality cult, Bashar may settle for consensus among his junta of Alawi officers rather than create a crisis that could break the system.

Regional Implications

Washington's decisions to invade Iraq and promote democracy in the greater Middle East have not only shattered the regional status quo, around which Syria built its reputation as the vanguard of Arab nationalism, but also threatened the very survival of the regime. Protecting Syria's own status quo by weathering internal and external threats has become a momentous challenge for the Syrian leadership. Accordingly, Bashar has attempted to solidify his rule by closing ranks with the top leaders of his regime. His efforts have strengthened the hardliners' determination to protect their entrenched interests, effectively undermining U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the region. Unless Bashar weans himself from the hardliners, Syria is set to clash with the United States over the future of the Middle East. In this respect, Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon was only a tactical retreat.

Robert G. Rabil, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is a visiting professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University and author of *Embattled Neighbors: Israel, Syria, and Lebanon* (2003).



Policy #992

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

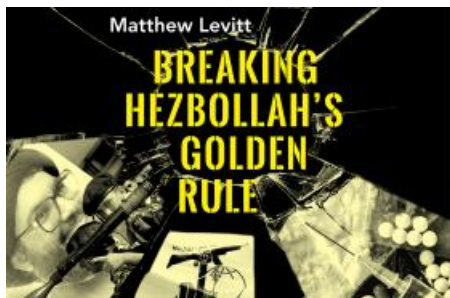
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)